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ABSTRACT

Sembene Ousmane's film, "Xala" (meaning impotence), can be seen as a revolutionary tool. Although his works were originally inspired by the African's struggle for liberation from colonial domination, "Xala" reflects the revolutionary intellectual's protest against corrupt socialist authoritarianism. Everyday events in the lives of the characters, as well as the characters themselves, portray the competition between the modern European world and the traditional African one. The film "Xala" is more effective than the novel due to the use of visual image and oral effect. (Author/STS)

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by Kenneth Harrow

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The function of ideology in Africa does not conform to that projected in the standard Marxist point of view--it is not molded after the structure of the industrialized European state with its classic struggle between the two titanic forces of the industrialized classes, bourgeoisie and proletariat. The structure of African society reflects a pre-industrialized configuration in which the very term socialism has assumed a new, often meaningless usage in which it is often employed, as in Algeria or Guinea, to denote a state which intrudes significantly in the private sector and exerts an authoritarian governmental control. As such, the social and political patterns in Senegal do not admit of a classical Marxist analysis, but they do reflect similar situations in an increasing number of nations around the world, particularly the non-industrialized, non-European states.

The rhetorical ideology of the ruling parties of most of those states may be couched in vague generalities about national pride, revolutionary independence, and colonial oppression, while simultaneously Western technological and economic influence, even tantamount to control, may remain widespread. Thus the opposition by the creative, living branches of the intelligentia to many newly formed socialist states is not a criticism of socialism, but of the abuses of official "state socialism," better defined as state capitalism or corrupt socialism.

Sembène Ousmane is no exception. His works, originally inspired by the struggle for liberation against colonial domination, now reflect the revolutionary intellectual's protest against corrupt socialist authoritarianism. Xala was conceived as such a revolutionary tool, and as such stands both against the corruption of the contemporary, neo-colonialist establishment, and for the basic values of the revolution of the common people. But this,

the "true" revolution of Sembène, is complicated by the particular nature and demands of his country's situation--a situation paralleled in many other sub-Saharan, and most North African and Muslim countries. The most prominent features which his protest addresses include classical Marxist, and uniquely Third World and Muslim, issues. They must be seen as a package, as encompassing a total political Weltanschauung in which revolution today presses its demands as insistantly as did the movement for independence in the past.

The particular nature of the situation in Senegal is best evoked through a series of Sembène's most striking images. The religious influences on the people are made especially visible in Xala, and Sembène develops the three major ones in his novel, including the Christian, Muslim, and traditional beliefs. The origins of Christianity are very old in Senegal, dating back to the earliest missionaries in West Africa more than two centuries ago. Père Jean--Papa John, the father of El Hadji's first wife, Adja Awa Astou--belongs to the older group of Christians, mostly Catholics like the venerable president of Senegal itself, Senghor, who had absorbed so much of the French traditions. But the struggle against European colonialism also took place on a religious level, and Islam has associated, and does still associate itself with the alignment of the East against the West. The conversion of Adja Awa Astou from Christianity (her former name was Renée) to Islam signals that revolt against that past. Now, as a Muslim, she represents the highest religious ideals set forth by her and El Hadji's new faith. She had accompanied her husband to Mecca on the traditional pilgrimage, thus winning for herself the honorific Adja, the feminine equivalent to El Hadji. She is totally obedient and submissive to her husband. Here this means that she accepts polygamy without dissent, and even accepts El Hadji's discrimination against her conjugal and sexual rights in favor of his other wives---again without a word of protest. She demands only that her religious, moral, and social respect be maintained. When El Hadji urges her to enter her co-wife's house on the way to his third's

wedding, she refuses to leave the car. Her dignity as Awa, first wife, demands that she be the honored one to whom the others must defer, not vice versa. When her husband becomes impotent, she protects his dignity by refusing to allow the subject to be discussed, particularly by her modern, revolutionary daughter, Rama. In all this she is exemplary. But for the Marxist, this represents delusion, not heroism: "The door closed, leaving Adja Awa Astou alone again. As others isolate themselves with drugs she obtained her own daily dose from her religion." (p.25)

At its worst the Muslim faith serves, in the novel, as an instrument for the men to oppress the women. El Hadji, who is not particularly devout, uses this, his "patrimoine religieuse," as his excuse for taking a young, beautiful creature as his third wife. When his daughter objects, he slaps her forcefully and evokes the religion, exploited here most blatantly for egotistical purposes.

The special stamp of African Islam is marked by the strong imprint which traditional religious beliefs have left upon it. The Senegalese people, and especially the dominant tribe, the Wolof, have long had a reputation for indulging in magical practices. Fetishes, protective amulettes, potions, spells and curses, all have invaded the monotheistic faiths, and have retained a capital importance in the lives of the people. The title, "xala," reinforces this fact, "xala" meaning impotency, here the consequence of a curse laid on El Hadji. These traditional beliefs differ widely from the Western, monotheistic religious systems, and are therefore not associated with the colonialist or neo-colonialist forces, they

are not allied with oppressive forces in society. Rather, here they are the property of theindigenous, non-Westernized poor, the weapons of the beggars and the propertiless and the rural people lacking Western armaments. The marabouts and beggars who cause and cure the "xala" are all poor or non-Westernized. They represent the masses, not as a proletariat; not as a product of a capitalist system, but the African, indigenous people who have refused to accept the modern, Western ways--or at least who have not been able to profit by the Western presence.

The class divisions that are now most apparent do not thus resemble the classical European features. The wealthy bourgeois Africans, many engaged in trade and finance enjoying the government's favors--have risen to occupy the places of the former white colonialists. And if the country is still endebted to France economically, and is tied to and controlled by the Metropolitan country as much as ever, still a new bureaucracy and infrastructure of African origins has sprung up, often the most visible sign of the corruption which halts material progress for the masses in their slums and villages. The Mercedes now have chauffeurs for black "hommes d'affaires," businessmen portrayed as cynical and corrupt middlemen acting as stooges for the silent and invisible forces of an everpresent, ubiquitous European capital.

As with most African questions, the reality of everyday life affords choices which are not pure in their alternatives, but which leave one midway between the two poles of the modern, European world and the traditional African. A character

strikingly caught thus is Rama, El Hadji's eldest daughter. El Hadji wishes (like Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart) that this daughter had been a son, since she is both more courageous and less mercenary than his other children. In the novel she drives a Fiat, and by dress and ideological choice asserts her identity as a modern African Muslim against both European "Tomism" and African, Islamic traditionalism. She it is who alone tells her father of her opposition to his third marriage, and she refuses to accept polygamy for herself when the time comes. In the film her revolutionary role is made more visible and is accentuated. Instead of a Fiat, she is on a mobylette, out for all the city to see. Her hair is plaited in traditional African fashion, not straightened in the modern European style. And her University work involves translations into Wolof, not French, which, in the film particularly, she refuses to speak.

Yet she enjoys the fruits of her father's corrupt wealth, and all her actions must take on somewhat the air of excuses made for a bad conscience. This point is brought out in the end of the novel in which the differences between her and the lumpen proletariat are stressed. When the host of beggars and cripples come to Adja Awa Astou's house and attack El Hadji, Rama is filled with indignation and anger. Her loyalties divided, her bad conscience, or its necessarily more sophisticated component of bad faith, leaves her "bursting with anger. Against whom? Against her father? Against these wretched people? She who was always ready with the words

'revolution' and 'new social order' felt deep within her breast something like a stone falling heavily into her heart, crushing her." (p.142) Her position must be the most compelling of all or the successful, revolutionary author like Sembène whose own dilemmas are most accurately reflected in Rama's.

The other women are much more easily portrayed as victims. The first, faithful wife, Adja Awa Astou, suffers deeply, but patiently due to her husband's polygamous choices--suffering the decline in his favors, and, in the end, of his fortunes as well. Her nobility is admirable figured in her majestic bearing and, in the film, in the telling roar of the sea and the wind which accompany her as she leaves the wedding celebrations of the third wife. She dresses in traditional clothing and belongs to a generation older than that of the other two wives--but still her villa and wealth, all bestowed by El Hadji, place her in the ranks of the African bourgeoisie, located in the suburbs with their well trimmed yards and well patrolled streets. Her victimization, thus, like her religion, is qualified by her material conditions.

The second wife, Oumi N'Doye, wears an elaborate wig, and dresses in modern, Western style, in a sexually appealing manner. Particularly in the film she is a domineering, almost castrating female. In the novel her function as servant to El Hadji's sexual and worldly tastes is accentuated. Above all, her mercenary qualities, seen in conjunction with her style and function in the marriage, clearly relegate her to

the role of the classically exploited wife for the bourgeois male, categorized in Marxist thought as a prostitute operating within the bourgeois family structure. In the novel this aspect of Oumi's nature is emphasized when El Hadji's fortunes collapse and she deserts him and becomes a high fashion woman of easy virtue.

The third wife is purely a sexual object. She is seen, not heard. In the novel her more vulgar features are emphasized, as is her inconsequential and shallow personality. She is depicted particularly as the adjunct or counterpart of her "mother," actually her aunt, who arranges the marriage and clearly manipulates El Hadji with the beautiful young girl as bait. The helplessness of N'Gone is reflected in the impotency of her aunt, whose two former husbands both died, and who now cannot find a third due to the superstition which holds that husbands die in threes. This aunt, the Badyen, is not left bereft of powers. It is she who knows how to challenge the foolish male ego of El Hadji and to seduce him with her niece. She is characterized in the novel as manipulative and greedy, but with the particular insensitivity of the victim,who grasps with the anxiety of the threatened who know that they have no other recourse to power. She is thus the counterpart of El Hadji and all the corrupt businessmen who reflect her in their own practices, mirror her situation in their own life style, and have exploited her in all of their own women. Love and hatred, as with the African-European relationship, also are reflected in the male-female relationships because they are based upon power, upon an authority

which devolves not from natural gifts or venerable customs but from force wielded always for selfish interest.

Along with the position of women, it is the question of language which most obviously places Aala in a unique, particularly African context. The issue of language lies at the core of acculturation--the process of replacing the indigenous African cultural identity with the European. In as much as the European model is associated with all the enviable attributes of modernity in the eyes of the contemporary African, it has held out an attraction that all the rhetoric and struggling for liberation have not been able to contradict. For the poor and uneducated classes, modern American gangster, Kung Fu and Western movies might serve on an elementary level a function similar to that of higher education for the elite. That education, particularly in francophonic Africa, has stressed and continues to stress "la mission civilatrice," with French "cooperants" teaching African schoolchildren throughout their former colonies, still using the French language, still focussing almost predominantly upon traditional French subjects such as French, and not African, geography, history and literature. The unforgettable, anguished cries of the North African writers, Jean Amrouche and Mouloud Feraoun--"J'ai le sentiment d'être condamné à la différence, à une irréductible et inquiétante singularité.... Je suis Algerien, je crois être pleinement Français."[2] "Que suis-je bon Dieu?...Qu'on me dise ce que je suis! Ah! oui, ce n'est pas suffisant."[3]--still testify eloquently to the continu-

ing crisis of identity introduced by the process of acculturation.

In Algeria the government has attempted to overcome this problem by the policy of Arabization, a program which focusses upon the educational system where the education in the early school years is carried out exclusively in Arabic. The Universities still rely upon French language instruction to a large extent, and the replacement of French by Arabic in Maghrebian culture has not yet occurred for the vast majority of Maghrebian authors. For Sembène Ousmane, the question of language is of major importance. A recurring theme in the novel is the opposition between Wolof and French. The young, revolutionary Rama insists upon conversing in Wolof--El Hadji in French. In the novel, Rama and her fiance, Pathé, have a pact to speak in Wolof, and they fine each other when one of them slips and lapses into French. References are made, in the film, to Kuddu, a Wolof language newspaper which associates itself with the plight of the poor African. Language is the weapon of struggle par excellence, and it both answers and raises complex questions which refuse simplistic solutions.

For example, the Awa, Adja Awa Astou--the former Renée--now speaks only in Wolof, and it is in her family that the struggle against Muslim polygamy and neo-colonial French cultural models takes place. In contrast, the household of Oumi N'Doye, the second wife, has capitulated completely to modern bourgeois fashion: "Oumi N'Doye had prepared her eye

in a spirit of rivalry. A reunion meal. The menu culled from a French fashion magazine...The table was laid in the French way.There were various hors d'oeuvres and veal cutlets. The Côtes de Provence rose kept the bottle of French mineral water company in the ice-bucket...." (p.55) Of course this carries through with all the characters: the greedier children of Oumi are raised in the French manner; the businessmen conduct their chambre of commerce meetings in emulation of their former rulers; El Hadji and the other bourgeois constantly affect French mannerisms: "Même les injures dans la tradition la plus pure de la francophonie," proclaims the president at the final chambre meeting.

And corresponding to the spoken word, the class divisions are equally strikingly visible to the eye--clothing, food, manners, religion even, all have correspondances to the verbal level, and it is here that we see the core of the problem posed by Zola. Sembène Ousmane has written this polemical novel in the very language his heroes oppose--the language of the oppressors, language used here as a purely and totally European cultural expression. As a successful novelist he has learned to make skillful use of the oppressor's tools, but not in a revolutionary sense. The banal composition and trite polemics- often couched in purely sociological jargon (e.g. "It is worth knowing something about the life led by urban polygamists. It could be called geographical polygamy, as opposed to rural polygamy....etc." p.66), betray a tradition of naturalism that dates from Zola and has scarcely improved over the original. The problem, of course,

lies in the bad conscience of most successful African creators who insist upon representing the interests of a class from which their success has removed them. In the novel the awkwardness of the linguistic theme is reflected in the fact that Sembène must identify those moments when his characters are speaking in Wolof by saying, in French, that they are doing so! But what he dares not do in the novel--that is, write in Wolof--he triumphantly asserts in the film. Sembène has solved one great dilemma of the educated African creator by turning to a medium in which he communicates with the uneducated classes without betraying his ideals. The emphasis on language which he now can with clear conscience assert in the film, is made visibly apparent to a much greater degree than in the novel. When Rama visits her father in his office, she insists upon speaking in Wolof while he responds in French. The novel doesn't contain these lines--nor El Hadji's fury when he finally explodes at his daughter. In the film, El Hadji defends himself against his former business colleagues. At the height of his polemic, he assumes his daughter's position, using the same expletive with which she had belabored him, "salauds", and requests permission to address them in Wolof. The roles reversed, aware of the implicit ideology behind his request, they angrily refuse him. The novel does not contain this dialogue. In the film the stately bearing of Adja Awa Astou is complemented by her speech in Wolof; Oumi N'Doye's pretentiousness is underscored by her obviously studied use of French. The novel cannot convey any of this. The importance of Kaddu as a revolutionary instru-

ment is stressed in the film, omitted in the novel. Subtitles cannot be used in novels.

Without having to sacrifice his former audience--we in the West evidently are still available as readers as well as viewers--Sembène has succeeded in expanding his appeal, and more importantly, his message to his African brothers and sisters in a way which doesn't betray what he is preaching. Here we must seek consistency and not judge the film on critical aesthetic grounds which ignore its ideological purposes. The film, Xala, is more effective than the novel not because of a more sophisticated use of the medium, but because of a more appropriate use of the visual image and oral effect. The wedding celebration, for example, is filled with numerous small touches used exclusively in the film, such as the fat man picking his nose, the American waitress saying "shee-it," the "oreos" joking about getting away from blacks in Spain and "Negritude" in Europe--the whole African bourgeois nouveau riche in all its pretentious crudeness, blindness, vulgarity and condescension. A little touch--the coins El Hadji throws to the beggars are retrieved at the pleasure of a soldier who filches one for himself. Crude power displayed in crude style--without extravagant color or plush imagery, lacking in sophisticated camera techniques, yet as memorable as the paraplegics who are on the outside. And no matter how far they are cast into the desert, the image of the cripples and the beggars will doggedly return to haunt their counterparts, the wealthy bourgeois,

who have risen from their ranks by thieving and who are afraid of seeing their own image figured in the others' anguish.

The film and the novel both say, in different ways, the same thing, that the rich are usurpers and opportunists whose pretensions to European culture disguise their recent climb up from the street. They hate the street and its poverty for reminding them of that fact, and particularly in the film this point is reinforced. In the novel El Hadji complains about the beggars to the president: "These beggars should be locked up for good." (p. 33) However, in the film he has the president call the police to have the street cleared of the "dechet humaine," claiming that they would hurt tourism, that independence should have brought an eradication to the sight of the beggars and cripples. The film version gives greater emphasis to their presence. We are always aware of the poor people in the streets, from the opening shot, to the wedding reception, to El Hadji's return to his shop. They gather in crowds when there's an accident -- and even to see this film being made! We see them shipped to the barren plains outside of town, returning painfully to the streets by crawling and dragging themselves back in the heat of the day.

In the crowd scene involving the accident, we see a man from the country being robbed. He had taken the savings of his drought-stricken village to town to buy grain and seeds for the new planting season, and now had lost everything. We see the thief take the money, buy some fancy clothes, and at the end take El Hadji's place on the council. The

Marxist theme,here, holds that private porperty is theft. As we learn, at the end, that El Hadji had also stolen the property of his clan, we realize that the thief is merely recapitulating El Hadji's same crime, that the cycle has come full circle and will continue to wheel the thieves in and out of place as each dog turns on the other, continuing to make a pact with the others when necessary, but never forming a living community. The poor, in contrast, must band together in order merely to survive. Their misery finds relief in the fraternity created by the communality of their condition. They have learned the law of survival, banding together, and can cope with misfortunes far greater than El Hadji's.

In the novel, bourgeois life and values are underscored by the use of imagery devoted to sight. Almost every emotional response is evoked in terms of ocular reactions. The characters are even defined by their eyes' appearance. Of Adja, "there was frankness in her almond-shaped eyes." (p.11) In feeling hurt by El Hadji, "her eyes were lifeless" (p. 14) People are constantly looking away, or down, or at someone to convey pain or disinterest. The co-wives "watch" the third's happiness. (p.23) Adja, unhappy, has "tiny bright dots (shining) in her eyes." (p.25) When Yay Bineta and the Badyen check to see if N'Gone has been deflowered,they arrive at the door and knock: "The two women exchanged glances. A vague anxiety appeared in their eyes. The Badyen turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open. She peered hesitantly inside. She was met by the blue light of the room. Frowning, she

looked around." (p.27)

The characters and their expressions both take the role of camera and of those who pose for its eye--what the existentialists call being-for-others. This imagery runs continually throughout the novel and is reinforced by El Hadji's reliance upon "seers" and his vulnerability to the curse of a blind beggar. What he doesn't want to see--the obverse images of himself in the street beggars and cripples--is really his own hypocritical, shallow soul. A Hadj who drinks and steals, evoking his "religious patrimony" to justify the greed and desire for a pretty, young wife; a Hadj who sleeps through the hours of prayer and seeks a cure with holy men so he can fornicate, not lead a devout life; a Hadj whose prosperty is not blessed, lacking in charity for the poor--in all respects the opposite of a true Hadj. Sembène describes this man's problems, the psychology and <u>Weltanschauung</u> of his class, in terms of seeing since being, for such a superficial and corrupted bourgeoisie, resides in the eye: in the impressions created by such wedding presents as a car with a bow around it, by Western businessmen's clothes which replace the African dress, and mostly by an awareness of the other and his presence which "sees" and judges on the basis of appearance.

The obvious superiority of the film medium for expressing this theme is reinforced by an expanded treatment of the contrast between wealthy and indigent. The wealthy are seen frequently indoors, with elaborate clothes and hairdoos, often times cleaning and fumigating foul odors created by the poor.

The colors and clothes of the poor complement the washed out walls and the large expanses of open space. Eyeglasses, sunglasses, references to blindness, and meaningful looks exchanged between the women, all call attention to the visual element. But the fourth dimension added by sound intrudes the music, like the insistent presence of the "dechet humaine," on the barely enclosed space of the wealthy, weaving like the thread that joins the beggar's chant to El Hadji's "xala." In the film the ideological statement is total: the shocking conditions of the lower classes cannot be hidden from sight. El Hadji's "xala" must become public knowledge as there must be visible verification of his deflowering of his third wife, to be made by the Badyen. His checks must bounce in the end as he goes bankrupt. His place must be taken in the chamber of commerce. The marabout must reimpose the "xala." And the revolution must take place under the gaze of the poor in whose hatred the dialectical negative is expressed.

This is the meaning of the final scene, that El Hadji's cure must consist in his debasement, as they were debased, in the ending of his isolation from the others, in his experiencing of the pain of humiliation which is their lot. Our senses and sensibilities are challenged in this, and the other scenes' frankness, intended by Sembène not just to "épater la bourgeoisie," but to force the African, and the European viewer, to confront a painful reality. Only on the basis of a confrontation with reality can change and growth take place. Only with "clairvoyance" can revolution pass beyond the rhetoric of the

established rulers. The collective exorcism of the "xala" at the end, the communal spitting on El Hadji, represents a revolutionary, fetishistic action, a class conscious act asserting cultural values which alone can give life to a real African socialism if it is not to betray itself in the "language" of its oppressors.

In Africa, to change a wealthy, but impotent expropriator to a poor but normal man is no small feat: magic, curses and a lifetime of dedication are required. For Sembène Ousmane such enormous forces as these lie in the grasp of the people whose power to change their condition must also be exercised if there is ever to be a revolution.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Sembène Ousmane, Xala (Westport: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1976), trans. Clive Wake. All references to Xala will be denoted by parenthetical indications to the pages after each quotation.

[2]"L'Eternel Jugurtha," Etudes Méditerranéennes, 2ième trimèstre, 1963, no.11, pp.53-4.

[3]Mouloud Feraoun, Journal (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1962), pp.70-71.